

Educators Are Super Experts in Their Field

Education is not unique in maintaining the myth that the professional has all of the answers and that laypersons are not only lacking in knowledge of the profession but are also incapable of understanding explanations given by the professionals. Unfortunately, many professions perpetuate such mystiques. Members of the medical profession often support a super expert myth. Many parents have presented questions or information to their children's doctors only to be told that they are just anxious parents, perhaps delaying a diagnosis that may be essential to early intervention services. In a number of cases, the doctors may announce the following year their "discovery" of a serious condition to the parents, who were concerned all along. Like educators, physicians should pay attention to the information that parents have about their children. The most famous historical example of doctors and parents working together led to the development of phenylketonuria testing and early treatment, which followed a doctor's interest in mothers' reports about symptoms (such as unusual urine odor in their seemingly normal infants).

Although it is true that educators have special skills and understanding that have been acquired through years of training, the field of education is so broad that no individual educator (or even several educators working together) can know every method or technique. Because they work with various numbers of students, educators' time

for observations may be limited, and therefore, those observations of students' needs may also be limited. It may be impossible for educators to know every facet of every student—strengths, weaknesses, and most effective teaching methods for each individual. Parents can add their observations to those of educators, thus enlarging the amount of information available about the individual needs of students with disabilities. If, in an effort to appear expert and competent to lay people, an educator ignores information that the parents offer, everyone loses, including the educator. To be a competent educator requires not only a foundation of special skills, but also an active involvement in seeking educational solutions by using personal observations and information from parents, who are also experts with regard to their own children.

Professionals caught in the super expert myth try to maintain the appearance of knowing all out of fear that parents or colleagues will question their competence otherwise. Furthermore, the need to appear super competent may become more imperative if school budgets are tightened and more people vie for fewer school positions. School personnel may feel financially and professionally threatened if they confess that they do not have all of the educational answers at their fingertips. They may sometimes overstep the limits of their own field of expertise in an effort to appear knowledgeable, as in the following example:



Janet McDonald is concerned because she thinks her young son with an intellectual disability has problems with his vision. At the school meeting, she asks the professionals about Andy's performance in school and whether they think he is having any problem with his vision.

They answer, "No," and go on to develop Andy's educational plan for the next year without suggesting that Mrs. McDonald consult a medical expert.

Janet McDonald fortunately continues to observe on her own. Two months later, she takes Andy to the eye doctor, who tells her that her son has a serious vision problem and will probably need to wear strong glasses for the rest of his life.

When Andy starts wearing the glasses, he becomes less clumsy and can do things more successfully.



An alternative scenario, in which the educators are interested in the parents' information, might be as follows:

Mrs. McDonald: *Do you think Andy has any vision problems?*

Special Education *Why do you ask? Have you noticed anything*

Director: *different in his behavior?*

Mrs. McDonald: *He seems to be getting clumsier, and he squints funny at his fork when he's eating.*

Teacher: *I haven't noticed anything, but I'll watch more carefully now that you've raised the issue.*

Special Education *I hope you two will keep in close commun-*

Director *ication. If either of you feels there is a question about Andy's vision, I think he should be tested by an ophthalmologist. The IEP can be delayed if you want to wait for the medical report, or we can proceed and revise it later.*
(to teacher and parent):

In the first scenario, the school people played "expert" beyond their limits and crossed over the line of educational expertise when they "diagnosed" Andy as having no visual problems. Their expertise should have helped them recognize, on the basis of Andy's performance in school, that he was facing some new difficulty. Instead, they assumed that Andy's problems of clumsiness, odd gestures, and poor performance were all part of his intellectual disability. Fortunately for Andy, his mother was concerned and wise enough to follow through on her own observations and eventually to seek out the right expert for the job—in this case, the eye doctor.

What could this mother have done at the IEP meeting instead of accepting the school people's opinion? She could have given a fuller explanation of what she had seen at home. If that did not arouse the suspicion and interest of the educators, she could then have insisted that Andy be tested before his IEP could be developed. To support herself in this undertaking, she might have made self-statements such as, "I don't have to be a pro to know what I have seen my child do" or, "If I'm going to help Andy, I have to be persistent."

The burden of being an all-knowing expert is as unfair to the educator as it is to the parent. Sooner or later, the expert will be found out and will then appear to the parent to be untrustworthy or incompetent. Many parents are more comfortable and more trusting with the

professional who can occasionally say, "I don't know." It has been the authors' experience in working with parents in training programs that the "I don't know" answer can help to establish a cooperative and trusting relationship between parents and professionals. Too many parents have been given absolute or definitive answers in the past that have been proven wrong over time (e.g., Darren did learn to read, with the help of new teachers, Ray now plays on a regular basketball team in the community center).

When parents suspect that they are dealing with educators whose behavior seems to be controlled by this myth, it is important that they do not insult the training, experience, or intelligence of the educators. Because parents have to work with these same educators to develop a good IEP, they must stick to the facts about what they have seen and heard their children do and make it clear to the professionals that they, the parents, are not trying to assume a professional role. Rather, they are caring parents who are acting as responsible advocates for their children by keeping important facts before the professional as services are being planned, developed, and reviewed.

Parents must be ready to support the educators who can say, "I don't know the answer" by appreciating their honesty and by cooperating with them to find the answers. Real experts know their resources and look to parents as a powerful and special resource for information about their students. But educators who present themselves as all-knowing experts may be convinced that they are more qualified than parents because they have a need to believe that they are completely objective. This is another myth.

Educators Are Totally Objective

Many educators and other professionals believe that parents' statements about their children are to be taken with a large grain of salt because parents are emotionally involved and lack the special training that develops the objective judgment that professionals have. The parents see the tree, but the professionals see the forest.

Of course, it is true that most parents are more emotionally involved with their children than teachers are and that occasionally their emotional concern can cloud their judgment, but educators are not as free of emotional involvement as they would like to believe. Their objectivity can be distorted by their personal need to support and justify their years of specialized training and work with students.

If a parent questions a teacher on the use and effectiveness of a particular method with his or her child, then that teacher may be faced with a dilemma: "If this isn't the best method, then maybe I have not effectively taught a number of students or have even failed to teach some students because of my reliance on this method." It may be easier for a weak teacher to believe that the parent is wrong and that the method, which has been used for so many years, is still the right one.

A strong teacher, however, would be able to accept parents' suggestions of information or even criticism of a given method because he or she knows the effective methods will stand the test of parents' questions and because he or she expects to be learning more every year about new methods, theories, techniques, and ideas that will help meet individual students' needs. The strong teacher accepts the responsibility for searching out new methods and answers in order to teach more effectively, unlike the weak teacher, who tries to defend past performance and protect the present position by emphasizing the years of training and denying the value of parental input. Let's look at an example:

Mrs. Costa: *I know Manny has had a hard time with math. He sometimes gets very upset doing his homework, even though it is only a few problems. I try to help him. Yesterday I had him using his fingers to count and it really helped him.*

Teacher: *I do not allow him to count on his fingers in class, and I would prefer that he not do this at home. He must learn to do the sums in his head.*

Mrs. Costa: *But he can't get the right answers that way, and he's so upset when he makes mistakes.*

Teacher: *He can't go through life counting on his fingers. He will have to learn like others with his kind of disability—through practice, practice, practice. You know, I have worked with children like Manny for many years, and I know what they need. They learn by rote; they must do things over and over until they learn to do it right.*

The poor parent is in a bind. If she helps Manny by letting him use his fingers, Manny will be in trouble at school. Yet without that

extra help, Manny is condemned to practice failure over and over until he learns to hate arithmetic.

The secure teacher might have said something like this:

"I know Manny is having a hard time with math, and I appreciate getting this information from you. If using his fingers helps him get the right answers, maybe I should be trying it in class. Let me check it out. Also, there may be other materials in my files that might help me give Manny the extra help he seems to need. We'll stay in touch regarding how he progresses in math."

Or, the teacher might have said something like this:

"You know, there was a time when we discouraged children from using their fingers to do math, but now we feel differently. In school Manny has used blocks to do his work, and right now he's using lines drawn with numbers to help him do his sums. I'm impressed that you noticed he needed something to count and let him use his fingers. He needs the success of doing it right. And I'm pleased you spend time with him on his homework. Don't worry that he'll use his fingers forever. As he makes progress, he'll rely less and less on learning aids like fingers and number lines."

In this case, the information is well received by the teacher, who is willing to either try another approach as suggested by the parent or acknowledge the value of the parent's observations and efforts.

There are other times when educators' objectivity is on the line. The teacher or specialist may see a need for more individualized instruction or some special supports, but he or she is in no position to ask for more services or help from the system, which claims to be short on money and staff. The educator experiences a conflict between his or her professional judgment and the resources available to him or her. Because it is hard for anyone to live with this kind of conflict day after day, soon the educator may begin to believe that perhaps the need is not so great after all and eventually may come to dismiss the student's need for additional services. In this way, the educator can escape from the uncomfortable realization that the student has serious needs that he or she is powerless to meet and can maintain the feeling that he or she is providing a good program or service. Consider the following example:

Mr. Harrison: *But last spring you said Sara needed more speech therapy.*

Teacher: *Well, I have given it much more thought. You know, there are a lot of pressures on children like Sara, and she is a very sensitive child. If we stress her speech problems, she may become more socially withdrawn.*

Mr. Harrison: *I think her poor speech interferes with her social development. Because other children have difficulty understanding her, she is often left alone or, at best, is the last one to be included.*

Teacher: *Let's give her time to develop at her own pace and see what she can do naturally and without pressure.*

This type of switch is not made to meet the child's education needs, but to sustain the teacher's own feelings of self-esteem and self-worth: He or she needs to believe that his or her job is worthwhile and efforts are not wasted. Everyone, including parents, uses this kind of mental gymnastics or adaptation. For example, one family may make financial sacrifices for a child's braces because they feel that orthodontia is essential for his or her physical and social well-being; another family may be so poor that they have nothing to sacrifice and come to believe that their child doesn't really need braces. Yet both children may have the same need. And sometimes parent advocates, in efforts to get the right services for their children, may find themselves beginning to believe that the professionals are doing a good job, because believing that is easier than continuing the frustration of the struggle to get services.

It is important for parents to understand that educators may also unintentionally make these kinds of mental adjustments to preserve their sense of professional worth, and parents should recognize that educators are not always free to act solely on the basis of their professional judgment to pursue and develop the programs they once realized were needed.

Educators Are Free Agents

Many parents ask why, if the school personnel know a program is needed, they don't just set it up. Because it is the school's job to edu-

cate all children, parents expect that school staff will do what is necessary.

What parents need to know is that people who work for school systems are not free to pick their resources—people, time, space, or materials. The school system sets limits on what is available to any employee and on what means school personnel can use to request or pressure for more resources. Parents don't realize that they may have more freedom to act than school people often do. When parents understand that educators are limited by the rules and structure of the system and that parents can more freely speak out, act, or even badger for services, then parents will realize that their advocacy efforts can help competent and concerned educators get needed services. Chapter 4 takes a close look at how the system operates and what kinds of experiences parents may have when they try to deal with the school system.

All of these myths about educators persist because many parents and professionals would like to believe that educators are all-knowing experts, clear-sighted and clear-headed, free of bias, and free to act on the children's needs as they see them. These myths place enormous burdens on educators who, like everyone, have both skills and shortcomings. They also need and want the resources necessary to do their jobs well, and they may need parents as allies to get the needed resources from a resistant school system.

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